

# Largest-ever Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* colony

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**La plus importante colonie du Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* jamais enregistrée.** Le Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* niche normalement de façon solitaire, parfois en petites colonies. La colonie la plus importante enregistrée auparavant comprenait 100 nids. Nous avons trouvé une colonie qui comptait 210 nids, dont plusieurs étaient occupés, ce qui en fait la colonie la plus importante documentée à ce jour. Pendant une seule séance de baguage auprès de cette colonie, 73 Tisserins écarlates ont été capturés, y compris deux reprises de 2007. Les nids accessibles ne contenaient pas d'œufs ; neuf nids avaient deux jeunes chacun. Un nid contenait un jeune Coucou didric *Chrysococcyx caprius*.

**Summary.** Red-headed Weavers *Anaplectes rubriceps* normally nest solitarily, sometimes in small groups. The largest colony previously recorded held 100 nests. We found a colony that contained 210 nests, several of which were active, making this the largest colony documented to date. During a single ringing session at the colony, 73 free-flying Red-headed Weavers were caught including two recaptures from 2007. No eggs were found in those nests which were accessible; nine nests had two chicks each. One weaver nest contained a Didric Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* chick.

**R**ed-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* normally nests alone and sometimes in small groups. Colonies may contain several nests, although most are from previous seasons (Fry & Keith 2004). The largest colony recorded is 100 nests (Tyler 2004) with 40 nests recorded on two occasions (Irwin 1953, Ginn 1999). Here we describe a colony containing *c.*210 nests, several of which were active although it was at the end of the breeding season.

A team of ringers stayed at Platjan Farm on the Limpopo River, North West Province, South Africa, on 3–5 February 2010 to ring birds in the area. One aim was to ring Red-headed Weavers. Most Red-headed Weavers had completed breeding, but a large still-active colony was found on 3 February at Mayholme Farm, south of Platjan. Several hundred nests were noted around the main farmhouse. We decided to ring at this colony on the morning of 4 February and count the nests, being joined later by P. & D. D'Arcy, who initially ringed along the river with others. In the afternoon and on 5 February we searched nearby farms where smaller Red-headed Weaver colonies were present, but breeding had ended. This paper describes the colony and ringing effort at Mayholme Farm.

## Ringing

The colony was situated around the main farmhouse (22°29'58"S 28°47'27"E) at Mayholme Farm on the Limpopo River. We erected 84 m

of mist-nets around the house, between 05.30 and 12.00 hrs. Birds caught were: 73 Red-headed Weavers, 13 Cut-throat Finches *Amadina fasciata*, two Lesser Masked Weavers *Ploceus intermedius*, one recently fledged Didric Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius* and 13 birds of other species that frequented the garden around the house. The Red-headed Weavers comprised 25 adult males and 36 adult females, 11 immatures and one very recently fledged juvenile. Immatures resembled adult females but had a dark tip to the maxilla.

Two birds were retrapped (FH37127, FH37130); both males that had been ringed on 18 July 2007. There were 12 captures here previously, in 2006–07 (SAFRING database), as incidental captures near the farmhouse (J. Heymans pers. comm.).

Two individuals showed plumage abnormalities. Male F35234 (Fig. 5) had an orange-yellow head rather than red (wing length confirmed the sex of this bird), and p10 (vestigial) in both wings was white in female F30018 (Fig. 6).

## Colony size and breeding

At 12.00 hrs the mist-nets were packed and a colony survey conducted. A total of 210 nests was counted around the house. Nests were mostly in trees but also on farmhouse structures; 159 nests were in a row of four wild *Burkea africana* in front of the house (Fig. 1), 37 in a baobab-like tree at the back (Fig. 2) and 14 on the house (nine on an aerial and its cable, and five on the roof edge).





**Figure 1.** Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* colony in front of Mayholme farmhouse, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Colonie de Tisserins écarlates *Anaplectes rubriceps* en face de la ferme Mayholme, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 2.** Part of Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* colony behind the Mayholme farmhouse, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Une partie de la colonie de Tisserins écarlates *Anaplectes rubriceps* derrière la ferme Mayholme, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 3.** Adult male Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps*, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* mâle adulte, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 4.** Adult female Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps*, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* femelle adulte, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Fifteen nests could be reached and nine of these contained chicks of varying ages. No eggs were found. The brood size of checked nests was consistently two chicks. Three nests contained chicks too small to ring (recently hatched or with their feathers still in pin) and one nest that could not be reached held two chicks seen begging at the entrance. Five nests contained chicks whose feathers were growing and could be ringed; one chick escaped and flew well to perch high in

another tree, thus nine chicks were ringed. One nest held a single well-feathered Didric Cuckoo chick, which was also ringed.

Nestling plumage has not previously been described in this species. The head of feathered chicks is golden yellow, unlike *Ploceus* weaver chicks, which tend to have olive-yellow feathers on the head. Bill was black with conspicuous cream-coloured gape flanges.





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**Figure 5.** Adult male Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* with orange-yellow head, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* mâle adulte à tête jaune orange, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 6.** Adult female Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps* with white p10, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* femelle adulte avec p10 blanche, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 7.** Recently fledged Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps*, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Tisserin écarlate *Anaplectes rubriceps* récemment sorti du nid, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

**Figure 8.** Chicks of Red-headed Weaver *Anaplectes rubriceps*, North West Province, South Africa, February 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

Jeunes Tisserins écarlates *Anaplectes rubriceps*, North West Province, Afrique du Sud, février 2010 (H. D. Oschadleus)

## Discussion

### Ringling

Previously, 394 Red-headed Weavers had been ringed or re-trapped in southern Africa since 1950 (SAFRING database), so the work at the Mayholme colony provided a substantial increase in ringed individuals of the species and the largest number of Red-headed Weavers ringed in a single day. This is the second least ringed weaver (Ploceidae) in South Africa, after Dark-backed

Weaver *Ploceus bicolor*. These are also the first Red-headed Weaver chicks to have been ringed in southern Africa (one has been ringed in Zambia).

Sage (1969) examined three Red-headed Weaver specimens in the National Museum of Bulawayo (Zimbabwe) with abnormal plumages. In two the red plumage was replaced by yellow and orange feathering and in the third the red was paler than normal. Webster (1955) noted a male with an orange head nest building.



### **Colony size**

Irwin (1953) found a colony of at least 40 nests at Gatooma [=Kadoma], in central Zimbabwe, and commented on the large size of this colony, compared to the usual 3–4 nests. Subsequently, Ginn (1999) noted larger-than-normal colonies in the south-east lowveld of Zimbabwe, e.g. at Gonarezhou and in the Limpopo Valley, with 30–40 nests in a single tree. At Gonarezhou he observed four males building in one colony and he counted 19 nests. Tyler (2004) found a colony of *c.*100 nests in a baobab tree on the slopes of the Matadela Hills, near Gobojango, Botswana, of which *c.*40 nests were active. All the above authors noted how unusual large colonies are in this species.

The colony at Mayholme is considered to represent a single colony of 210 nests, making this the largest colony documented for the species. If, however, the nests in front of the house are considered a separate colony to those behind it, this remains the largest colony with 159 nests in just four trees, 105 of these in one tree.

### **Breeding**

Mean clutch size reported for Red-headed Weaver is 2.6 (Fry & Keith 2004). All nests we checked had two chicks, irrespective of the ages of the chicks; possibly late clutches are smaller.

Didric Cuckoo parasitism of Red-headed Weavers has occasionally been recorded and Payne & Payne (1967) calculated a parasitism rate of 3% in this species. It is probable that the free-flying cuckoo was raised by Red-headed Weavers, giving two records of cuckoo parasitism for the Mayholme colony.

Cut-throat Finches are known to breed and roost in weaver nests, including those of Red-headed Weavers (Fry & Keith 2004). The

Cut-throat Finches at Mayholme were only caught during the first net round, indicating that they were roosting in weaver nests and not breeding at the time of our visit.

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